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Kennedy mum despite report he faces firing

By Jim Nichols

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William H. Kennedy, San Diego's U.S. Attorney, was keeping his plans to himself today following weekend reports quoting a high White House source as saying he must resign or be fired "within a matter of days."

Kennedy, as he has since the controversy broke out, declined today to talk with reporters about his plans. A friend said he doubted Kennedy would be willing to resign.

The administration demanded last week that Kennedy quit because he had confirmed a newspaper story identifying a former Mexican official suspected in a major car-theft case as being a major Central Intelligence Agency source.

When Kennedy did not resign or comment on his intentions, the White House official indicated he could be fired if he did not resign today.

"His silence will not be tolerated past the weekend," the official said.

He indicated President Reagan, who alone is empowered to fire a U.S. Attorney, would sign a letter of dismissal if Kennedy had not been heard from soon.

If Kennedy resigns, however, he could choose the day he would leave office, perhaps at the end of the month, the official said.

Superior Court Judge Ross Tharp, a friend of the embattled federal official, said he had not spoken with Kennedy since last week, but added he thought Kennedy was determined not to resign.

"Bill is a man of principle," Tharp said. "I doubt very much that he would resign for having told the truth."

Sources say the administration feels Kennedy embarrassed the government when he confirmed that the CIA opposed prosecution of Miguel Nassar Haro, former Mexican security chief, since Nassar was a prime source of CIA information.

Nassar is one of several Mexican officials accused here of complicity in a multimillion-dollar crime ring which stole expensive cars in the United States and sold them to wealthy and prominent customers in Mexico.

Nassar left his job as chief of the Directorate of Federal Security in January, and the CIA has said it no longer objects to his prosecution.

Several local officials — including Mayor Wilson, Police Chief Bill Kolender and District Attorney Edwin A. Miller — have urged that Kennedy be retained. Several federal judges here also have praised him publicly.

But the Justice Department and the White House are described by officials there as determined to oust Kennedy, a presidential appointee who can be fired by Reagan at any time.

The Washington officials are described by sources there as irritated by the show of support for Kennedy in San Diego, believing that Kennedy is behind it or at least that he approved of it beforehand.

Friends of Kennedy have said that Associate Attorney General Rudolph Giuliani, No. 3 official in the Justice Department, demanded Kennedy's resignation in a telephone call last Wednesday night.

Kennedy was named U.S. Attorney here last November.